

The Self and the Other in Jnanadabhiram Barua's *Bilator Sithi (Letters from Abroad)*

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Abstract

Jnanadabhiram Barua's *Bilator Sithi (Letters from Abroad)*, a travel narrative in Assamese depicts the author's life in England at the beginning of the twentieth century. It consists of a series of letters where Barua attempts to understand the specificities of a culture that appears foreign to him. The narrative highlights the complex negotiations that the author has to make as a colonized subject in the colonizer's land. I want to look at how these negotiations were shaped by the dominant discourse of imperial superiority. What are its implications on the subject's sense of the self? What does encountering foreignness entail in this particular context? Travel writing has often been associated with the expansion of European imperialism. I plan to examine if this genre undergoes a change of perspective in the hands of a subject of European imperialism. How does the relationship between the self and the other play out in this text? Who is the other in Barua's narrative? I want to probe deeper into how the construction of the other in this case is influenced by the popular notions about Assamese identity.

Keywords: Travel Writing, Self and Other, Identity, Colonialism, Recognition

Jnanadabhiram Barua's *Bilator Sithi (Letters From Abroad)*, a collection of letters which was first published serially in the Assamese journal called *Bahi* from 1909 to 1918, played a very important role in shaping the contours of Assamese travel literature. The letters were published later as a book in 1929. Through *Bilator Sithi* the author gives a perspicacious account of his journey to England and his life there. Right at the very outset he eulogizes travel associating it with knowledge and adventure. To drive his point more strongly he cites the examples of famous travelers like Megasthenes, Hiuen Tsang, Bernier and Tavernier. He then proceeds to point out that the Assamese community's strict notions about purity and pollution have stopped its members from exploring other parts of the world. He links this attitude with a myopic world view and contrasts it with what he perceives as the visionary zeal of the British who were not afraid to leave the comfort of their homes to explore new regions. He says,

We need to learn a lot from the British race. Could they have become so great and powerful if they would have decided to remain in England, Scotland and Ireland with their wealth buried under the earth? Even a small child with a little education will say, "They could never have. If they would have stayed at home they could not have come to India. We would have never heard of them" (Barua, 2005, p.2; My translation)

As we can see from the passage cited above, Barua fails to highlight the connection between travel and the expansionist policies of the colonial nations. Throughout his narrative he does not question the legitimacy of the British rule over India and makes it appear like a benevolent enterprise. He even resorts to the use of standard tropes of colonial vocabulary such as the lazy native, superstitious native, unruly native etc to talk about the people of Assam. His account remains completely silent not only about the unjust and exploitative nature of the Empire but also about the various cases of resistance against the British rule. So should one simply dismiss this text for being steeped in the dominant discourse of colonial superiority? Certainly, not. On probing deeper we encounter several instances in Barua's account where the narrative subverts the intention of the author and reveals the true nature of the colonial enterprise. The author's claims within the text create an internal contradiction- on one hand he talks about the greatness of the Empire and on the other hand he unwittingly records many cases where the sufferings both physical and psychological of the colonized subjects become obvious. In the course of this paper I primarily want to focus on this particular contradiction.

Several attempts have been made so far to understand the otherisation of the inhabitants of Assam which is undoubtedly of extreme importance. But in this paper I want to focus on the role of the other in the development of Assamese identity. Who is the other in Barua's narrative? How is the construction of the other shaped by the existing notions of Assamese identity? How does the relationship between the self and the other play out in Barua's text?

The Self and the Other

In *The Phenomenology of Spirit* Hegel highlights the role of the other in the constitution of the self. He alerts our attention to the fact that emergence of self-consciousness can never be independent of the other and can happen only in an intersubjective situation. Using the metaphor of the relationship between master and slave he shows that only through mutual recognition both the self and the other can achieve freedom in the true sense of the term. The birth of self-consciousness is simply outside the realm of any possibility without the process of self-recognition. In his own words-

For self-consciousness, there is another self-consciousness; self-consciousness is *outside of itself*. This has a twofold meaning. *First*, it has lost itself, for it is to be found as an *other* essence. *Second*, it has thereby sublated that other, for it also does not see the other as the essence but rather sees *itself* in the *other*. (Hegel, 2018, p. 109)

The question that we are confronted with at this juncture is whether this mutual recognition which is so crucial for emergence of self-consciousness is possible between the colonizer and the colonized subject. Does the complex negotiations that Barua was forced to make while travelling to Britain as well as during his stay there open up the possibility of this kind of reciprocal acknowledgement in some way? According to Fanon there is simply no possibility of such reciprocity between the colonizer and the colonized. In *Black Skin White Masks* Fanon tries to understand the significance of the master slave dialectic in the colonial context. He acknowledges the role of recognition in the formation of subjecthood. In the section titled "The Negro and Hegel" he says,

Man is human only to the extent to which he tries to impose his existence on another man in order to be recognized by him. As long as he has not been effectively recognized by the other, that other will remain the theme of his actions. It is on that other being, on

recognition by that other being, that his own human worth and reality depend. It is that other being in whom the meaning of his life is condensed. (Fanon, 2008, pp. 168-69)

But Fanon remains extremely cynical about the prospect of this absolute reciprocity which is at the very "foundation of the Hegelian dialectic." (2008, p. 169) The Hegelian slave can attain subjecthood by recognizing its master as an object. But the colonized subject fails to reach this stage. In a lengthy footnote Fanon explains,

I hope I have shown that here the master differs basically from the master described by Hegel. For Hegel there is reciprocity; here the master laughs at the consciousness of the slave. What he wants from the slave is not recognition but work. In the same way, the slave here is in no way identifiable with the slave who loses himself in the object and finds in his work the source of his liberation. The Negro wants to be like the master. Therefore he is less independent than the Hegelian slave. In Hegel the slave turns away from the master and turns toward the object. Here the slave turns toward the master and abandons the object. (2008, p.172)

As Fanon has pointed out the colonized subject fails to recognize the colonizer as an object and remains fixated with the master's identity. We see this happening in Barua's case. He remains obsessed with the identity of the white man and tries to be like him. In *Bilator Sithi* he repeatedly talks about the greatness of the British race and the need to learn from them. At one point he says that what one can learn in India in five years is very negligible when compared to the amount of knowledge that one can acquire simply by travelling around London and reading one or two English newspapers for a year. Barua's claim may remind one of Macaulay's infamous minute on Indian education. It will not be an exaggeration to claim that the author's belief in the superiority of the British is absolute. He considers Indians to be inferior and almost blames them for the hardships they were forced to endure under the colonial rule.

In one of his letters Barua describes his visit to the Sussex County Cricket Ground where he sees 'India's pride' Ranjit Singh playing cricket. He expresses deep admiration for the cricketer. But he has more to say about his good reputation among the British than his contribution to cricket. He saw Ranjit Singh as someone who unlike many Indian has managed to earn the approval of the colonizers. It becomes glaringly obvious that he too seeks similar kind of approval. He wants recognition by the master which has obviously been denied to him. The author remains fixated with the identity of the white man towards whom he turns for an understanding of his own sense of self. The result is of course fear and anxiety that marked his interaction with the British. I will probe deeper into this aspect in the next section.

Barua urges Assamese boys to take interest in cricket when they visit England. Cricket becomes one thing in the long list of things that one needs to learn from the British. He goes on to say,

There are many things in our country about whose use we still remain unaware. We need to properly use the things that we have and learn the ones that we don't from other races. One needs to keep this in mind if India wants to be counted among one of the civilized countries of the world. Just sitting idly at home and chatting with our friends will get us nowhere. We will have to work hard. We cannot be lazy. Both the young and the old should pay attention to this fact. We need someone like Ranji in Assam to make us proud in the world stage. (Barua, 2005, p. 14; My translation)

In almost all the letters the author persistently informs the readers about various things that the British can teach them. A sense of great awe and wonderment pervades the entire narrative. The

readers are told that people in England have better houses, superior schools and more refined manners. He talks about the glory of the English theatre in great details while there is only one passing reference to *Bhaona*, the traditional theatre form of Assam. Anything that has not been validated by the colonial power has very little worth in Barua's eyes. He even makes fun of *bari* which used to be an important component of every traditional Assamese household. *Bari* means the area behind homes that is utilized to grow useful trees, shrubs and herbs. For Barua it signifies nothing but wilderness that has to be tamed if one wants to keep one's surroundings clean. He then goes on to talk about the beauty of the gardens in front of the homes in London.

Barua's entire account is informed by a civilizational discourse that defines the natives as barbarians who have to be saved. Certainly his stand towards the colonizers may shock many readers today. But one has to keep in mind that such an understanding of the British Empire was quite dominant during his times. Guha explains this point with remarkable clarity through the example of Anadaram Dhekiyal Phukan who played an important role in the development of Assamese language and literature. "Born in an enlightened Brahmin landowner family and educated in the Hindu College of Calcutta, Anandaram believed in the regenerative role of the British rule and remained a loyal Government servant till his death." (1990, p.20) He was greatly impressed by England's material progress and fervently hoped for reforms and material progress in Assam. (Guha, 1990, p.21) A biography on Dhekiyal Phukan titled *Anandaram Dhekiyal Phukanor Jivan Caritra* was written by Gunabhiram Barua. Gunabhiram Barua, one of the pioneering figures of modern Assamese language was the father of the author of *Bilator Sithi*. He too was a firm believer in the capability of the British in guiding the Assamese people on the road to progress and offered financial assistance to young men who wanted to go to England. Right at the very outset of *Bilator Sithi* we find Jnanadabhiram Barua claiming that a region can prosper only if its youth is given the opportunity of learning new things by travelling abroad. He even makes an appeal to the rich to sponsor such trips for the overall betterment of the society.

Undoubtedly, all these figures mentioned above were deeply concerned about the construction of Assamese identity according to the new ideals that were available after the arrival of the British. However, I am not at all claiming that this process of identity construction solely relied on these new ideals and had nothing to do with the precolonial past. But in the course of this paper I have primarily focused on the impact of the colonial encounter. All of them played a very important role in shaping the contours of modern Assamese language and literature. They sincerely believed that the British can play a very crucial role in helping the natives of the region to actualize their potential. All of them tried to participate in the process of Assamese identity construction by relying on the possibility of recognition by the British.

The Empire and the Traveler

It is important to note that *Bilator Sithi* was written during a time when travelling abroad was still considered a taboo by many in the Assamese society. It was widely believed that one would lose one's caste by visiting some foreign land. As Barua has mentioned in the narrative a good number of people during that time were under the impression that everyone was forced to eat beef and drink alcohol in Europe. He repeatedly tries to assure his readers that such assumptions are completely false. The author gives a glorifying account of his journey abroad not only because he was steeped in the dominant discourse of colonial superiority. His narrative was also shaped by his desire to encourage the people of Assam to travel which according to him was one of the best ways of gaining knowledge.

As I have mentioned earlier though Barua avoids talking about any of the unjust and exploitative aspect of the Empire and attempts to represent the colonial rulers as just and benevolent, the text subverts the intention of the author. He ends up recording many instances through his writing that exposes the true nature of the Empire. We are told that when he was travelling from India to England for the first time some British children behaved extremely rudely towards him and his other Indian friends. He notes that the parents make no attempts to stop these children from doing so. He finds this incident strange but do not come to the conclusion that the behavior of both the parents and children are indicative of racism but it is certainly obvious to the readers today.

I have argued in the earlier section that the colonized subject seeks recognition from the colonizer and this need in him makes him feel fearful and insecure. Since absolute mutual recognition is almost never possible in the colonial context the colonized subject suffers deeply from a sense of inferiority. In one of his letters Barua talks about his misery after making a small mistake for not being conversant with the formal eating manners and etiquette of the British society while having dinner with a family in London. He explains that when asked to pass the bread by a girl he does it with his hands instead of using a fork. Though no one seemed to notice Barua simply could not forget about this for a long time. He constantly kept thinking about how uncouth he must have appeared to the entire family. Barua comes to the conclusion that he could have easily avoided this mistake if he would have been more observant. Then he goes on to advise his readers to observe the manners of the British people very carefully while travelling abroad. The author's anxiety about being judged for this trivial incident is indicative of his feelings of fear and insecurity in front of white people. Most of his encounter with them is about proving his adequacy in front of them.

The text is full of several such instances that show the devastating psychological impact of colonialism upon its subjects. While describing his journey to England by sea he recalls that the ship made the first stop at Madras port. He talks about feeling very sad when he found out that a particular place in Madras where mostly Indian people reside is known as Black Town. He writes- "The words black and white are the sources of many problems in this world" (Barua, 2005, p.23; My translation)

Conclusion

Many Indians have travelled from India to England since the beginning of the colonial conquest but their accounts have not received much attention and the tales about the land of the colonizer that they brought back home have remained largely unknown. This is especially true in the case of travel writing from Assam as most of these texts are written in Assamese and have not been translated into any other language yet.

Travel writing has often been associated with the expansion of European imperialism. Does this genre undergo a change of perspective in the hands of a subject of European imperialism? What are the implications when the account of travel to the land of the colonizer is written by a colonized subject who perceives colonialism as a benevolent enterprise as in the case of *Bilator Sithi*?

Travel narratives from India are very different from the account of the European travelers and have to be interpreted in their own terms. (Fisher, 2007, p.154) I want to suggest that *Bilator Sithi* despite attempting to present a favorable picture of colonialism emerges as an indictment of the colonial encounter. I have already shown how Barua's account subverts the intention of the

author and exposes the brutal nature of the British Empire which was solely premised upon the exploitation of the native population. The text ends up revealing the trauma of the colonized subject who was forced to negotiate with the rapid changes in the society that came in the wake of colonialism.

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